

CAN WE SHAPE SOCIAL
INNOVATION-BASED URBAN POLICY?
REFLECTIONS ON THE *FONDO PER L'INNOVAZIONE SOCIALE*
STRATEGY IN MILAN

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The article aims to conceptualise an urban policy cycle that incorporates the social and territorial innovation approach in all its phases. This conceptualisation will be supported by a case study analysis, the “Accelerator for the local economy”, an urban policy promoted by the Municipality of Milan in cooperation with a group of local partners, and included in the governmental framework of the *Fondo per l'innovazione sociale* (Social Innovation Fund). The project under consideration has been designed to support an “acceleration programme for local businesses”, implemented with a view to improving entrepreneurship, skills, and the creation of job opportunities in peripheral areas – a response from the Milan municipal administration to tackle urban marginality issues and the ongoing economic crisis resulting from the harmful effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The hypothesis to be tested is whether social and territorial innovation can be not only the content, but also the method for creating a territorial development policy, by acquiring the dispersed knowledge of actors and targets, by triggering collective intelligence processes in the redefinition of social needs, and by tabling shared solutions among stakeholders.

Keywords: social innovation, urban policy, place-based policy, urban development, territorial development.

Il presente contributo si prefigge di concettualizzare il design di una politica urbana che incorpora approcci basati sull'innovazione sociale in tutte le sue fasi. Questa concettualizzazione verrà applicata nell'analisi di un caso studio: l'Acceleratore per l'economia di territorio, un progetto promosso dal Comune di Milano in collaborazione con un gruppo di partner locali, inquadrato all'interno del programma nazionale Fondo per l'innovazione sociale. Il progetto è stato pensato per sostenere un programma di accelerazione per le imprese locali, realizzato con l'obiettivo di sostenere l'imprenditorialità, le competenze e la creazione di opportunità di lavoro nelle aree periferiche della città di Milano. Una risposta messa in atto dal Comune di Milano per sostenere questi obiettivi in contesti di marginalità urbana osservati nella prospettiva storica della crisi economica generata dalla pandemia da Covid-19. L'ipotesi che l'articolo intende verificare è se l'innovazione sociale possa rappresentare non solo il contenuto ma anche un metodo per il design di una politica urbana: attraverso l'acquisizione di conoscenze disperse dei target di riferimento e tramite processi di intelligenza collettiva, ridefinendo in questo modo l'interpretazione dei bisogni sociali e conseguentemente la proposta di soluzioni condivise.

Parole chiave: innovazione sociale, politica urbana, politica territorializzata, sviluppo urbano, sviluppo territoriale.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES OF THE WORK

Social innovation is increasingly considered one of the possible tools with which public policy issues can be addressed. In this work, a territorial policy case study entitled “Accelerator for the local economy”, delivered by the Municipality of Milan, will be presented with the aim of conceptualising a policy cycle capable of incorporating lessons from interdisciplinary literature on social innovation in all its phases. The starting assumption of this contribution is that social innovation may represent not only the content but also the methodology to design new territorial policies (Bartels, 2020; Moulaert *et al.*, 2007; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005, Tricarico and Venturi, 2020). The issue of social innovation has so far been less investigated by labour economists and macroeconomists, who usually focus on the technological dimension of innovation. Even innovation economists who adopt a “National or Regional Innovation Systems” (Freeman, 1987; Asheim and Gertler, 2005; Doloreux and Porto Gomez, 2017) or “smart specialisation” approach do not analyse in enough depth the role of citizens and local communities in promoting innovation and relaunch processes of the local and national economy.

With this goal in mind, the first hypothesis that will be verified in this paper is whether, through social innovation methods, it is possible to overcome the classic paradigm of economic development policies towards place-based territorial development (see Barca *et al.*, 2012). Such an approach to policy design overcomes the focus on sectors, and targets the “classic approaches” to regional development, channelling all efforts into surveying contexts, places, and different actors that, due to their accurate knowledge of local problems and peculiarities, play a crucial role in determining territorial development.

The second hypothesis to be verified is whether social innovation methodologies can become useful for the implementation of these approaches. This will be done by looking in particular at their application in defining the problem and in building tools useful to manage the interests of multiple stakeholders through incremental collective-intelligence processes based on experimental activities carried out in the local context (Mulgan, 2019; Mulgan, 2007; Jessop *et al.*, 2013; Gerometta *et al.*, 2005).

From a methodological point of view, the review of the literature on the observed phenomena and on the social innovation methodologies applied to policy design has been complemented with the presentation of the approaches and data collected by the authors in dealing with the case study, based on an action research methodology applied in the first phase of project development (Chevalier and Buckles, 2010; Greenwood *et al.*, 1993; deLeon, 1990). Within this context, the research practice is the result of a mixture of research activities carried out in policy design processes, and interaction with stakeholders, from which a “reflection on the course of action” emerges (Schön, 1991).

The paper represents a conceptual attempt to discuss the possibility of applying methods of social innovation in urban policy making. The originality of the case is given by the fact that it is part of a scheme of place-based policy for local economic development and entrepreneurial innovation in the context of the serious economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which is seriously impacting the city of Milan. Against this background, section 2 is devoted to the context description, firstly analysing a literature review on the application of the concept of social innovation in urban policy; section 3 focuses on the conceptual references introduced in the policy design

methodology; section 4 describes and introduces the project proposal; section 5 analyses the agenda-setting methods; section 6 deals with the definition of the policy targets and local development informants; section 7 analyses the ways in which policy problems are examined in depth in comparison with local stakeholders; section 8 mentions the way in which the evaluation indicators are constructed; and section 9 provides some concluding remarks.

2. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM: ECONOMIC POLARISATION AND POLICIES FOR THE ECONOMIC REVITALISATION OF PERIPHERAL AREAS

As widely described by reports and research that have critically dealt with the topic of urban policy design, the definition of the peripheral condition is a problem that has always concerned policy makers, particularly when associated with complex concepts such as social innovation (Bragaglia, 2021; Thompson, 2019; Urban@it, 2020). Such complexity has its historical roots in the critical discussion around planning when defining precise “objects and subjects” (Fainstein, 2005), especially when applied to the resolution of complex and politically debated problems such as poverty, marginality, and social deprivation (Delica and Larsen, 2020; Raco and Savini, 2020; Briata *et al.*, 2009). In view of the complexity of this theoretical context, some considerations should be added about the shrinkage of financial resources in urban policy interventions, following the reduction in public transfers to local authorities in recent years, at both national and EU level (Cepiku *et al.*, 2016). In the Italian context, this trend has marked a decrease in public investment in fixed territorial capital (i.e. Ombuen, 2019) and also in resources allocated to local welfare systems (Andreotti *et al.*, 2012), in line with the downsizing of the National Fund for Social Policies (Kazepov and Ranci, 2017). Starting from these trends (Kazepov and Barberis, 2017), a reinterpretation of the policies for marginal areas is leading to new forms of investment based on bottom-up mobilisation of private actors, where social innovation becomes an intervention method and policy tool thanks to institutionalised cooperation between public, private, and private social subjects (i.e. Cottino and Zandonai, 2012). From the analysis of this phase of change, the emergence of two predominant positions can be observed:

- a first proactive vision on the experimentation of social innovation methods in territorial policies, which acknowledges and describes their transformative capacity in terms of sustainability of local public interventions and of implementation of place-based approaches to local development and urban regeneration (i.e. Moulaert *et al.*, 2005; Pares *et al.*, 2014; Fulghesu *et al.*, 2020; Tricarico *et al.*, 2020a; Mangialardo and Micelli, 2018), thus introducing an innovative formula for sharing responsibilities in policies (or collaborative governance) or in the regulation of urban common goods emerging thanks to social actors’ spontaneous initiative (Iaione, 2015; Tricarico *et al.*, 2020b, Tricarico and Zandonai, 2018);
- a second, more critical vision that identifies in these approaches the creation of selective mechanisms that spot and dismiss the most complex marginal situations (De Leonardis *et al.*, 2016). Such stance, in its extreme variants, considers social innovation as an elusive keyword of localist agendas that serves as a “strong call to arms” through which local (and, in some cases, national) political and economic elites are aggressively trying to promote economic regeneration (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

This contribution recognises the validity of critical analysis, in particular with respect to the fragmentation of the experimental interventions proposed in the framework of past territorial policies based on social innovation methods (e.g. Laino, 2018). In modelling a policy cycle for the specific policy in question, both criticism and the analysis of the strengths of local social innovation policies can provide useful ideas to overcome the critical issues of more traditional approaches to overcoming the conditions of marginality. The diffusion of the concept of social innovation in development policies on a European scale has been highlighted by a series of relevant studies in the field of policy analysis (Moulaert and Mehmood, 2019) with some critical perspectives on the use of this paradigm in terms of effective governance in relation to policy implementation (Swyngedouw, 2009). Regarding the European Union (EU), the social innovation concept has also become crucial in European policy agenda setting, in such a way that social innovation has been included among the most relevant fields since the Europe 2020 agenda¹. The European Commission has included a clear reference to the social innovation concept within the 2014-2020 Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme², with the aim of supporting the development of adequate, accessible, and efficient social protection systems and labour markets and of facilitating reforms, promoting decent work and adequate working conditions, a culture of prevention for health and safety in the workplace, a healthier work-life balance, good governance for social goals, including convergence, as well as mutual learning and social innovation. The EaSI programme has been confirmed in the 2021-2027 European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programme with an endowment of 676 million €, with the aim of promoting a high level of sustainable and quality employment, guaranteeing adequate and dignified social protection, combatting marginalisation and poverty, and improving working conditions.

From an operational point of view, in the case study in question, the “peripheral urban condition” is defined starting from the concept of economic and labour polarisation as an emerging socio-economic phenomenon (Pratschke and Morlicchio, 2012; Crankshaw, 2017). Extensive literature underlines how the rapid transformation in contemporary economies due to technological innovation and automation processes represents a growth model with opportunities for businesses and consumers. At the same time, the literature available on the topic widely acknowledges how this model creates highly polarised employment mainly benefitting medium-highly skilled workers (Eubanks, 2018; OECD, 2019), generating territorially uneven development concentrated in certain areas of cities and regions (Crankshaw, 2017). In Milan, as in the major European cities and regions (Dauth and Suedekum, 2016), these gaps are reflected in the location choices of urban functions, which are usually concentrated in the financial districts of large cities rather than in the peripheral areas (Anselmi and Vicari, 2019; Mosciaro, 2020). In the same way, only a part of the population currently appears capable of facing the challenges of the new labour market, increasingly based on the use of technology and on the demand for key skills in terms of creativity, management of complexity, and orientation towards innovation (Bigatti, 2016). These phenomena risk exacerbating social tensions, as well as generating new forms of exclusion concerning not only weaker groups but also a large segment of urban communities: workers with skills at risk of obsolescence, traders, and craftspeople,

¹ Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%200007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>.

² Further information is available on the EaSI programme webpage (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1081>).

who are no longer competitive because they are crowded out by the development of new technologies, as well as micro-entrepreneurs operating in sectors affected by globalisation, in addition to women with intermittent careers, first and second-generation foreign citizens, inactive young people, and young people with qualifications and skills that are not in demand in the highly knowledge-intensive labour market (Henry and Pinch, 2000; Power and Lundmark, 2004).

A further element of complexity stems from the current economic and work conditions in cities following the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 health emergency. In general terms, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has reviewed growth prospects for 2020 and 2021, forecasting a more serious and worse recession than in 2009. The interruption of manufacturing industrial chains, and the drop in prices of raw materials have shocked the financial markets, tightened liquidity conditions in many countries, and created unprecedented capital outflows (UN, 2020). According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the ongoing job crisis will cause a global loss of 25 million jobs, meaning job income losses worth around 3.4 trillion \$. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), self-employed workers, and workers in the informal economy are the most affected; the impact is expected to be particularly strong on equal opportunities for women in the workforce (ILO, 2020).

Italy was among the first European countries to experience a rapid spread of Covid-19. The measures put in place with the aim of reducing individual exposure to the virus in workplaces and public spaces have led to a severe contraction of GDP and the labour market, which was weaker as compared with European markets. The recrudescence of the health crisis turned into particularly critical economic downturns in employment between March and June and between June and December: 2020 closed with a lower employment level than that recorded in December 2019 (–1.9%, equal to –444,000 units). The decrease involved men and women, employees (–235,000) and self-employed (–209,000), and all age groups, with the exception of the over-50s, whose increase was mainly due to the demographic effect. The employment rate dropped by 0.9 percentage points (p.p.) in one year (Istat, 2021). As for Milan, despite its economic situation being better off than the national average, it was particularly hit by the health crisis, and this had a significant impact on the labour market. The year 2020 closed, for Lombardy, with a decline of –2.4% on an annual basis. The employment rate stood at 66.1%, two p.p. below the previous year's value, while the regional unemployment rate reached 6% (Assolombarda, 2020). In all advanced countries, it has been observed that the crisis has particularly affected groups and categories already marginalised in the labour market and that new fragilities have emerged due to the limitations and risks of Covid-19. The crisis has also had substantial implications in terms of gender equity: the sector most affected by lockdown measures (especially in Italy) was the services one (typically acyclical, unlike manufacturing), which is traditionally female-dominated (Alon *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, as shown in a study by the European Commission, this sector involves the most disadvantaged and vulnerable workers, as they are typically characterised by low wages and precarious conditions (Fana *et al.*, 2020).

In Italy, as well as in the other member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2020), the sectors most affected by the direct effect of social distancing are travels and tourism, retail sales of products and services, and small manufacturing. Such activities, many of which are located in peripheral and semi-peripheral areas of medium-large urban areas, guarantee work and economic

opportunities for the middle class in cities. OECD has also observed that the operational arrangements adopted in these sectors during the gradual reopening following the lockdown (e.g. takeaway and restrictions on international and regional mobility) further contracted the aforementioned sectors, jeopardising the opportunity cost of reopening. All of this had a significant impact on the reduction of investment in spatial regeneration, and consequently caused a strong crisis, in real estate terms, of the retail space segment (Scenari Immobiliari, 2020). As concerns the trend of the Italian economy, the National Institute of Statistics (Istat) (Istat, 2020) reports that, in March, retail sales experienced a collapse (–21.3% in terms of cyclical change in volume), caused by the fall in the trade in non-food products (–36.5%), while the trade in food products was rather stable (0.4%)³. E-commerce registered a marked increase (the trend variation in volume was +20.7%). According to estimates provided by the branch of Confcommercio operating in the provinces of Milan, Lodi, and Monza and Brianza (Confcommercio Milano, Lodi, Monza e Brianza, 2020), throughout 2020, retailers forced to suspend their activity due to the lockdown imposed by the Covid-19 health emergency experienced a loss of turnover worth 4.9 billion €, i.e. 40% (4.2 billion € only in Milan and in its metropolitan area). A total of 22,700 trade activities were suspended, involving as many as 123,000 employees, of whom more than 42,300 were laid off. The situation of smaller companies (those staffed with up to nine employees) is particularly critical – such businesses make up 65% of the commercial activities closed in the provinces of Milan, Lodi, and Monza and Brianza. As concerns business recovery, as at 30 April 2020, 25% of businesses (i.e. approximately 3,700) were at risk of closing down. The recent Censis report (Censis, 2020) provides a worrying picture of work in the sectors most affected by the lockdown, which feature greater concentration of young people, precarious work contracts, low incomes, and obviously the presence of micro-enterprises with only one employee, as well as a large number of undeclared workers or gig workers. Such situation will exacerbate the already existing “fragilities” in terms of quality of labour supply: intermittent employment contracts, low wages, and reduced purchasing power of families, which imply that adequate living standards are not guaranteed.

Within this scenario, the Covid-19 pandemic emphasises the fragility of our cities, and raises a new issue in terms of search for solutions capable of transforming urban economic growth and development models following the adoption of a new approach to the management of services and to the organisation of working activities. The polarisation of the labour market and the gap between capital-intensive business sectors and small-micro manufacturing, craft, and trade businesses, two phenomena which were widespread before the current health emergency, are now greatly exacerbated. Consequently, they risk undermining the stability of the economic and social structure of many Italian cities such as Milan. Such gap is likely to engender new forms of exclusion concerning not only the so-called “vulnerable population groups” but also a large segment of urban communities. Without a specific policy aimed at boosting work in sectors made up of small manufacturing, craft, and trade businesses, the impact of such disparities at territorial level will manifest itself more and more evidently in the progressive widening of gaps. These gaps refer to the urban quality and social and economic vitality between, on the one hand, areas of the city (the “city centre” and the

³ Purchases of food products proved more dynamic in large retailers (with a trend variation in value of +7.4%) than in small retailers (–1.0%).

so-called “new city centres”) where real estate investments and high-value housing, production, and trade are concentrated, and, on the other, suburban neighbourhoods characterised by high rates of early school leaving, youth inactivity, and phenomena of social distress and poor social cohesion (Andreotti, 2019; Armondi and Di Vita, 2017). There emerges a risk of desertification of entire areas of the city, which has a progressive impact on the increasing gap between, on the one hand, those people, businesses, and neighbourhoods that are able to withstand the current economic and social crisis, and, on the other, the ones that are not, as well as between, on the one side, those who make the most of the globalised economy, and, on the other, those who miss out on the opportunities it offers (Duvivier *et al.*, 2018). Having a look at the traditional policies aimed at supporting innovation in the entrepreneurial field, they seem incapable of reducing territorial polarisation, partly due to ineffectiveness (see EBN, 2013), partly owing to the great difficulty recently encountered by central States in mobilising investments in the face of tight budgetary constraints in current expenditure. Such aspect turns out to be in contrast to the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Dipartimento per le politiche europee, 2020) funded by the “Next Generation EU” programme. This is the reason why the relevance of the attempt to introduce methodological innovations, as suggested by the project described here, could mark the consolidation of a new paradigm for public intervention aimed at promoting economic development and at generating job opportunities.

3. REFERENCE CONCEPTS IN POLICY CYCLE MODELLING

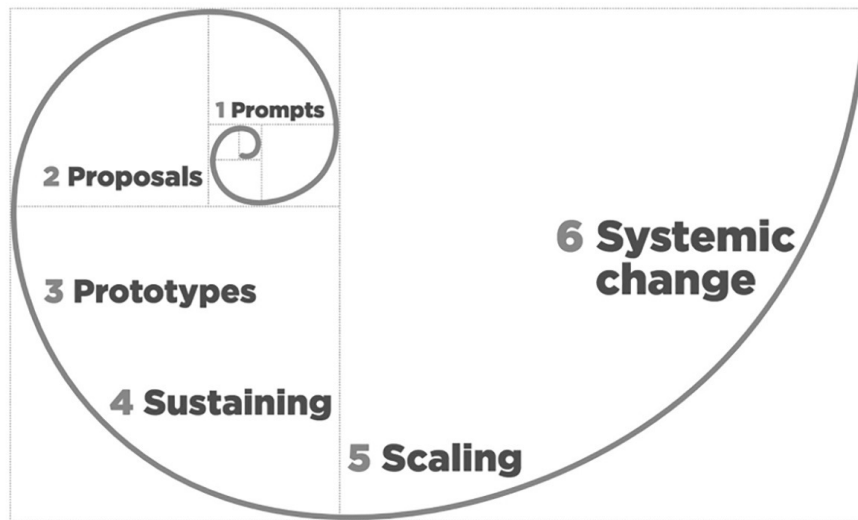
For a long time, the conceptualisation of public policies has been influenced by the assumption, by the Government that implements them, that it had full knowledge and autonomy with respect to goals and results (see Habermas, 1984). Such an approach triggered policy interventions built on what Nobel Prize-winning economist Ronald Coase (1988) called “blackboard economics”, a system in which all the incentives and information necessary to achieve the desired goals were known, and the lecturer (the State) only had to draw the solution on the blackboard, and then apply it to real life. The untruthfulness of these premises had negative consequences for the formulation of policies, and the practice of *ex-post* evaluation of public policies has often found that these were not able to achieve their goals, or triggered a large set of unintended consequences (Mintrom and Williams, 2012). The classic paradigm of regional development policies has often been characterised by this “blackboard economics” approach, based on micro and macro-economic tools that act on atomised subjects with perfect information, and therefore able to respond to the incentives clearly defined by the policy actor. The theoretical goal of this work is to incorporate in the case study “An accelerator for the local economy”, sociological concepts capable of substantiating a place-based territorial development model (see Barca *et al.*, 2012). The concept from which to start is that of “dispersed knowledge” (Hayek, 1945), according to which economic and social interaction “data” are dispersed in the interpretative framework of individuals. They have specific information in terms of time and place, i.e. fragments of knowledge interpreted in the light of their experiences and skills. Notoriously, Hayek comes to the conclusion that these data cannot be centralised by the political decision maker; however, it is certainly possible to think of policies that,

from their conception, take into account the fact that there is information asymmetry concerning social problems. Such asymmetry can be observed in relation to the policy maker, who does not know the “data” with which local actors operate, but also in relation to the actors themselves. Precisely from such limited knowledge, the need to “discover” social institutions emerges: rules, norms, places, and methods of interaction that facilitate social cooperation. Hayek’s theory is confirmed by several sociological schools of thought, which however share the idea that economic action stems from places and social norms embedded in the social fabric (see Granovetter, 1985). It is necessary to integrate this vision of the social actor, be it a policy maker or a recipient of policies – as well as of venues as places of accumulation of specific knowledge and social norms in public policies – to devise policies that are able to enrich the elements of social innovation. However, this should concern not only the content but also the whole policy design process, starting from a territorialisation of the policy cycle. Such a debate developed in the framework of action research linked to the experimentation of new urban welfare tools (Bifulco, 2016; Maranghi, 2020; de Leonardis, 2008; Vitale, 2009), rather than of local economic development in the areas of work and entrepreneurship. In carrying out the project described above, it will be essential to focus on how to overturn a policy approach aimed at privileged actors such as innovative startups, towards workers with skills at risk of obsolescence, micro-entrepreneurs, traders, and craftspeople who have not managed to fit into the value chains generated by the introduction of new technologies. The dimension of interest in the definition of this policy consists in targeting subjects that, by definition, are less likely to benefit from traditional micro and macro-economic incentives, as well as territories with less ability to incorporate positive-sum social norms. It is precisely this set of elements that makes the attempt to use the elements of social innovation interesting from a theoretical point of view. As regards social innovation, reference will be made to the model commonly adopted in the literature for the development of social innovation projects, Murray *et al.* (2010) (fig. 1), where six distinct stages are identified to implement social innovation in an ecosystem, creating a specific framework for analysing the actors, stakeholders, and actions necessary to achieve social objectives:

- a) the *Prompts/Diagnosis* stage identifies the factors (or social needs) determining the need for innovation, specifically the problems to be tackled;
- b) the *Proposals* stage corresponds to the generation of ideas to tackle the problems identified beforehand;
- c) the *Prototype* stage includes the first attempt to test the proposals, as well as to improve the solution through interaction, trial, and error;
- d) the *Sustaining* stage is aimed at assessing social innovation to ensure the financial sustainability of the project;
- e) the *Scaling* stage consists in the identification of strategies to spread innovation through an adaptive and scalable approach;
- f) the *Systemic Change* stage concerns the transformation of society as a whole.

Since the concept of social innovation includes very different phenomena and methods, thus representing an “experimental toolbox”, it is possible to focus on such dimension to carry out an assessment of its ability to identify new needs and possible strategies for adapting to contexts, engaging institutional actors, private individuals, and civil society in order to reconcile their interests.

Figure 1. The six stages for the development of social innovation projects



Source: Murray *et al.* (2010).

4. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT PROPOSAL

The project “An accelerator for the local economy” is aimed at providing a policy response to these issues. The Municipality of Milan has identified the creation of an “accelerator for the local economy” as a tool in this regard, i.e. a service that the municipal authorities want to fine-tune to support the development or revitalisation of economic activities rooted in neighbourhoods and urban communities, with the aim of creating job and business opportunities for the middle class, as well as of engendering widespread social benefits, with particular reference to the suburbs of the city. As already discussed, such policies are formulated within the national framework of the *Fondo per l'innovazione sociale* (Social Innovation Fund); this somehow frames the scope of possible policy choices to address the social problem in question. In this sense, the path dependency typical of policy decisions is exacerbated by the nature of public calls for tenders and calls for proposals for the assignment of resources to political and social actors that have already successfully operated in a similar domain. The project implemented by the Municipality of Milan carries on a line of work already started at the Urban Economy and Work Department, with initiatives based on the combination of innovation and social inclusion, and targeted, directly or indirectly, at the most vulnerable population segments and urban districts (e.g., in recent years, actions have been implemented such as: regeneration and transformation of buildings and spaces owned by the Municipality of Milan that were no longer in use; support, incubation, and acceleration of innovative startups with a high social impact; and setup of a network of municipal digital manufacturing labs –

fablabs and makerspaces – with the aim of promoting generalised access to Industry 4.0 technologies). The innovative feature of “An accelerator for the local economy” is the use of methods to support innovation (e.g. acceleration paths, smart planning, and horizontal and experiential learning – Jégou and Bonneau, 2015) to promote a knowhow-based widespread and proximity economy (Boschma, 2005), with particular reference to the craft, light manufacturing, and neighbourhood retail sectors (Futureberry and Comune di Milano, 2019). The general objective of the project is to transform the Milan suburbs⁴ into a lab in which to validate these intervention models to make them scalable and replicable in other urban and periurban contexts, with a view to generating social benefits through cohesion and inclusion. Starting from this goal, the Municipality of Milan has identified three policy goals, i.e. three territorial economic dimensions to be accelerated:

- *growth and reskilling of people*, combining entrepreneurial culture, traditional skills in the craft, manufacturing, and trade fields, “hands-on” experiential methods, and use of digital technology;
- *support for the birth, growth, and regeneration of companies* capable of staying on the market, developing innovation skills, and creating opportunities for medium and low-skilled people⁵;
- *support for the territorial rooting* of companies to maximise the impact on social cohesion generated in the contexts in which they operate.

5. AGENDA SETTING

This policy was initiated by the Municipality of Milan in cooperation with a network of partners whose intervention was funded by the Government's *Fondo per l'innovazione sociale*. As a result, the reference model for reconstructing the beginning of the policy cycle is the one presented by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as the traditional agenda-setting model, known as the “awareness model”, under which policies are initiated by policy makers, addressing a specific social problem. Cobb and Edler (1971) underline that the initiation of a policy depends on decision makers' ability to understand and prioritise a social problem felt by people. This implies that a policy enters the decision-making agenda through a “top-down” definition mechanism, which, however, incorporates the dynamic elements of social innovation to collect dispersed knowledge and to favour the embedment of positive-sum social practices, institutions, and norms. With this goal in mind, the first definition of the problem that is reported here represents only a starting point of the policy. Consistently with the six-stage classification provided by Murray *et al.* (2010), the preliminary policy plan has been divided into stages that reflect those of social innovation:

- *first intervention (Prompts/Diagnosis and Proposal)* – implementation of a feasibility and executive planning study that will contain the details of the experimentation: in-depth validation of the social need on which the intervention should be effected, definition of impact indicators, identification of modalities to respond to the need through the setup of an acceleration model associated with innovative financial schemes, and identification of additional local actors to be involved in the implementation of the experimentation;

⁴ For a mapping of the Milan suburban area, see the publication series edited by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Polytechnic University of Milan, and funded by Fondazione Cariplo, “LaCittàInTorno”, available at: <https://lacittaintorno.fondazionecrippl.it/download/>.

⁵ As to the skills hierarchical framework, see OECD (2017a).

- *second intervention (Prototype and Sustaining)* – experimentation based on the output of intervention 1, which will consist in the development of a pilot project based on an impact finance scheme and of an acceleration programme that can be implemented in one of the innovation hubs that are already working in partnership with the Municipality;
- *third intervention (Scaling and Systemic Change)* – development on an urban level, of the acceleration service and of the financial support scheme through the construction of a network of actors and territorial services (e.g. training centres of the Municipality of Milan, incubators, makerspaces, and fablabs) able to extend the intervention area to all the suburbs of the city. At this stage, the establishment of a legal entity with mixed public-private governance as a tool for the sustainable provision of the service will be considered.

6. DEFINITION OF TARGETS AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT INFORMANTS

The preliminary framing⁶ of the social need in the description of polarisation phenomena can be observed at three levels, which correspond to the targets identified in the initial project proposal:

- a) *people* – the urban level, evidence can be found of how labour demand has increased both as concerns highly qualified profiles (+6.5%) and as to unskilled ones (+17%), while it has experienced a dramatic reduction (–39% in the period 2010-2016) as concerns profiles with blue-collar and craft skills (Centro Studi PIM, 2018);
- b) *businesses* – despite the increase in both employment and GDP in the two years preceding the Covid-19 crisis, the local economic activities that have guaranteed territorial coverage and vitality in the neighbourhoods do not seem to benefit from this positive trend. Unioncamere's data confirm the difficulties experienced by Milan-based traders, who suffered a 1.5% decline in turnover in 2018, with micro-enterprises being affected even more strongly (–2.2%). Similarly, craftsmanship, which at national level suffered a 10.9% decline in the number of businesses since 2010, experienced, in the Milan area, a 0.2% reduction in the number of businesses, as well as a 0.8% decline in terms of headcount (–0.8%) (CCIA, 2018);
- c) *marginal territorial contexts* – the analysis of the Milan socio-territorial context (Lelo *et al.*, 2019; Riva, 2019) outlines a geographical pattern still strongly linked to the centre-periphery gradient, with the exception of new urban development areas that are hit by ravaging and extremely rapid phenomena of economic and real estate development (the so-called “new city centres”); the majority of economic activities with high added value are concentrated in the most “privileged” areas of the city, while phenomena of degradation, poor economic vitality, high early-school-leaving rates, and youth inactivity persist in other – even territorially contiguous – areas. Urban regeneration and the fight against degradation in suburban areas represent the main priorities of the current municipal administration, which has prepared an intervention plan worth 1.2 billion € investment concentrated mainly in public works and services (“Neighbourhood Plan”).

The common feature of these targets is the divergence with respect to the traditional recipients of innovation policies: economically and culturally vulnerable people who have not been able to fit into digital and global value production chains or to fully exploit

⁶ This is the result of a series of preliminary research works commissioned by the Municipality of Milan on the reference targets.

the tools and opportunities that such chains offer. Bitetti (2018) argues that, through a bottom-up approach in the survey on the preferences of a representative sample of vulnerable people (the unemployed), perceived obstacles to entrepreneurship appear to be very different from those of the traditional targets of policies aimed at supporting new businesses (Minola *et al.*, 2014). They are mainly due to the absence of personal aptitude, risk aversion, and poor financial literacy, rather than to the lack of technical tools and skills. Also, from the point of view of sustaining the creation of ecosystems in which innovative businesses work, there is strong scepticism towards the role of institutional actors and the public administration, particularly in marginal urban contexts (Welter *et al.*, 2008). Due to this information asymmetry, the audience of stakeholders involved must necessarily include a series of actors capable of identifying the potential of these territories. Entrepreneurs, digital companies, financial operators, incubators, makerspaces, and fablabs actually have information, rules, and practices that are fundamental to address these challenges from a territorial perspective (Suire, 2019; Mariotti *et al.*, 2017). If the purpose of a policy is to collect and incorporate their skills, it becomes necessary to think of different methodologies, linked to the specificities of territories and communities, able to meet the specific needs of the identified targets, but above all to raise awareness of the policy problem in question.

7. THE POLICY REDEFINITION METHODOLOGY

Kingdon (2013) explains how policy problems are social constructs made up of three elements: *a) a cognitive element*, i.e. a causal theory of what generated a problem; *b) a regulatory element*, i.e. a value judgment on the fact that a situation is unacceptable, and thus should be changed; and *c) a prognosis element*, i.e. one or more solutions implied by the definition of the problem. For this reason, when defining the problem, it is necessary to enrich the cognitive element as much as possible, gathering both the expertise of local development informants in relation to best practices, and the targets' preferences as they emerge from the bottom, to devise policies to support entrepreneurship and retraining that are different from traditional ones.

Having this purpose in mind, the preliminary definition of the problem, as outlined by the decision makers of the Municipality of Milan, can be enriched by the information obtained in two processes summarised here below:

a) focus groups with different representatives from business associations (in the craft, trade, and manufacturing sectors) and with a group of policy activists, researchers, and experts that have worked in territorial areas identified by the Urban Plan for Outskirts (Comune di Milano, 2019) and in the peripheral areas of other cities (in the Italian and European contexts). The meetings will be aimed at understanding the needs and conceptual categories used to define the phenomenon of exclusion from business growth, job vulnerability, and problems with respect to the local context⁷;

b) semi-structured interviews with local development informants, identified through a mapping of innovation hubs, financial services for businesses, territorial employment support services, and real estate funds. Local development informants are consulted to evaluate the composition of the targets, the criticalities of contexts, and the project

⁷ The composition of focus groups took into account gender balance and heterogeneity in terms of each participant's expertise and with respect to the targets of the project.

resources envisaged to overcome the phenomenon described above and to ensure the functioning of the acceleration paths.

8. CREATION OF MEASURABLE DIMENSIONS, AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDICATORS

The creation of indicators is usually associated with the policy assessment phase, however, upon defining the problem, it is important to outline a multidimensional set of indicators that takes into account the information collected during the investigation on the problem setting. This set of indicators aims to identify obstacles to local development with a view to measuring the effectiveness of the policy intervention that has been put in place to overcome them. The indicators relating to business creation and to the impact on neighbourhoods will be developed starting from the assessment model promoted by the Urban Economy Department and the Tiresia laboratory of the Polytechnic University of Milan in the framework of the Milan National Operational Programme on Metropolitan Cities (2014-2020) (Comune di Milano, 2018). A second set of indicators on the creation of “quality work” will take into consideration dimensions such as accessibility, stability, and remuneration with the aim of describing a labour supply embedded in the productive and social fabric of Milan as a result of the activities promoted by the accelerator – the framework on the quality of work promoted by OECD (OECD, 2017a) will be used as the main reference. The last methodological aspect to consider is the adoption of a bottom-up approach in the assessment of the weight of such indicators, overcoming the arbitrariness of the weights attributed by the promoting organisations (Ravallion, 2010), thanks to the surveys based on the information obtained from interactions with the targets (e.g.: OECD, 2014; Bitetti, 2012). Even when apparently neutral, policy indicators tend to reflect, in selection and aggregation, the preferences of the organisations that promote them, incorporating convictions and value judgments on their weight. To overcome this limitation, the idea is to test a set of indicators designed through the direct interaction with targets and stakeholders, shaping these on the basis of the preferences collected from representatives of the subjects targeted by the policy. When the point of view of the person who builds the indicator, and that of the reader coincide, all assumptions are open, and the construction of the index is transparent, and meets local preferences. The information obtained on the weighted preferences of the targets of the policy intervention could perform a dual function: *a*) the development of a grid of goals and priorities for multivariate analysis of costs and benefits in the formulation and selection of policy instruments; and *b*) the creation of an index of indicators to measure the outcomes, and not just the outputs, of the policy in question.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The case study “An accelerator for the local economy” can represent an interesting example of an experimental policy approach aimed at addressing the problem of economic and social polarisation on a local scale. The project shows that it is possible to design a policy cycle that includes elements of dynamism and openness to the inclusion of decentralised knowledge and preferences at all the design stages (definition of the problem, formulation, and impact assessment). Such a policy design is considered pivotal by a consolidated

school of thought adopting a pragmatic approach to social innovation (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Mulgan, 2007; Smith and Martin, 2020; Blanco and Leon, 2017). While it is certainly too early to assess the effectiveness of the policy in question in reducing territorial gaps and in supporting disadvantaged segments of the population, it is certainly possible to note with interest an approach that synthesises elements of sociological, economic, and urban policy literature, redefining the approach to social innovation in its theoretical elements, and incorporating them into policy makers' procedures. In this way, innovation would not only be the content, but also a concrete method of social intervention.

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